

the corner

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A Path Not to Take [Ramesh Ponnuru]

Former Republican congressman Tom Davis says that following Specter's defection Republicans "must focus on the broad principles that made our party strong: limited government, free trade, free markets and a strong defense. That's it. Believe anything else you want, but don't make those beliefs a litmus test for admission." As a reaction to the Specter news, this makes no sense. If free trade were a litmus test, Specter would have been booted out long ago—Max Baucus is a better free trader than he is (based on the Cato Institute's vote scores). And while I yield to very few people in the strength of my support for free trade, it isn't an issue that has made the GOP strong. In 2006, national-security issues hurt Republicans badly; in 2008, economic ones did. It takes a certain single-mindedness to conclude that social issues are therefore the problem.

But Rep. Davis is not alone. Senator Olympia Snowe writes that "it was when we began to emphasize social issues to the detriment of some of our basic tenets as a party that we encountered an electoral backlash." Really? Abortion, marriage, and the courts were much bigger issues in 2002 and 2004 than in 2006 and 2008. Like Davis, she says she wants Republicans to concentrate on restraining government spending. Apart from everything else that might be said about this prescription, didn't Snowe just vote for the stimulus bill a few weeks ago?

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